

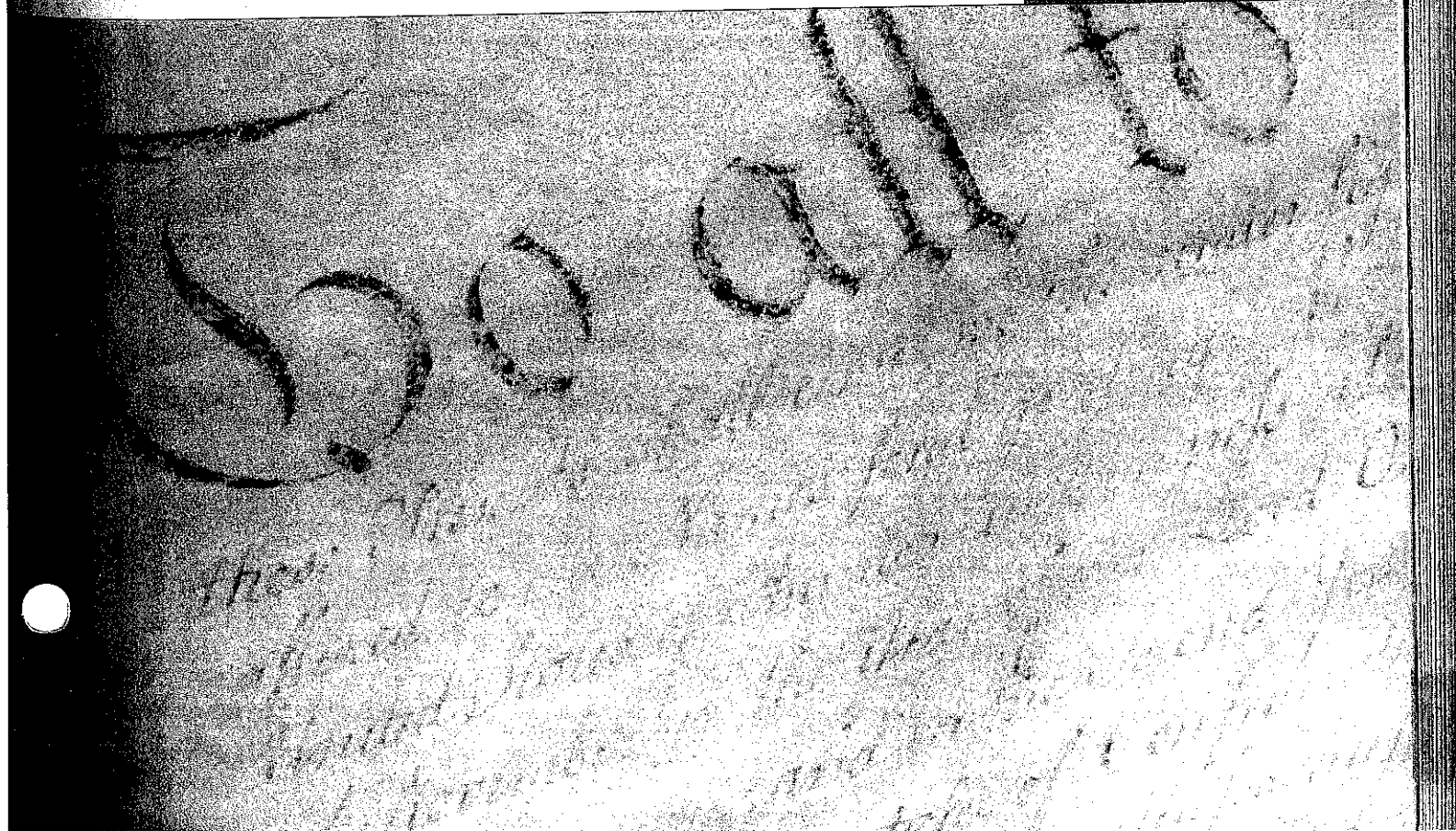
How did the Articles of Confederation organize the first national government?

LESSON PURPOSE

Our first government, the Continental Congress, drew up a constitution stating its powers. This constitution was called the Articles of Confederation. In this lesson you learn about some of the problems the Founders faced in creating our first national government. You will learn about the successes of the first national government. You also will learn about the weaknesses of government under the Articles and why some people believed that a new constitution was necessary.

When you finish this lesson, you should be able to explain how the Articles organized the national government. You should also be able to explain how the problems with the Articles caused the Founders to write a new constitution.

11



TERMS TO UNDERSTAND



Articles of Confederation
national government
Northwest Ordinance
Shays' Rebellion

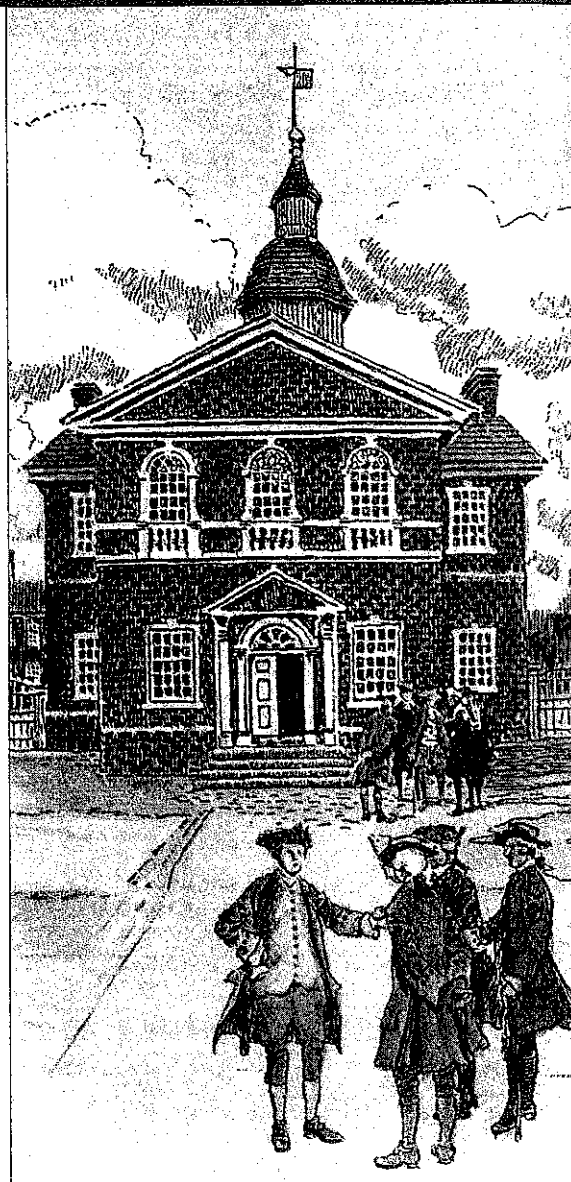
What are the Articles of Confederation?

Once the war against Great Britain had started, each state was like a separate nation. Each state had its own constitution and government. To the people, their state was their country.

The Founders believed that a **national government** was needed to unify the states and to conduct the war. A national government could also control trade and manage conflicts among the states. The states also needed to be united in how they related with the rest of the world.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee introduced two proposals to the Second Continental Congress. In one, Lee proposed independence from Great Britain. In the other, Lee proposed a national government to unify the states. Both resolutions were adopted.

Our nation's first constitution was the **Articles of Confederation**. The Articles created our first national government. Congress adopted the Articles in 1777. Final approval by the states occurred in 1781, and then the Articles came into effect.



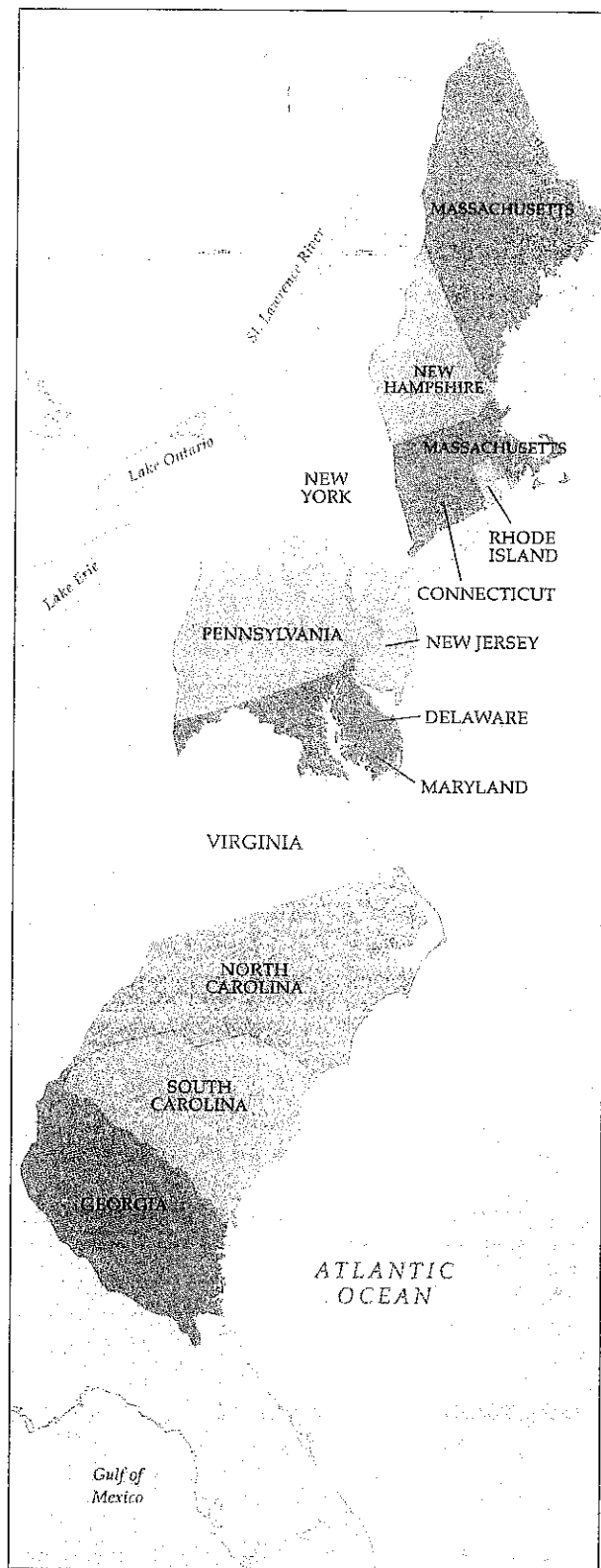
Why did the Founders believe that a national government was necessary?

What problems did the Founders face in writing the Articles of Confederation?

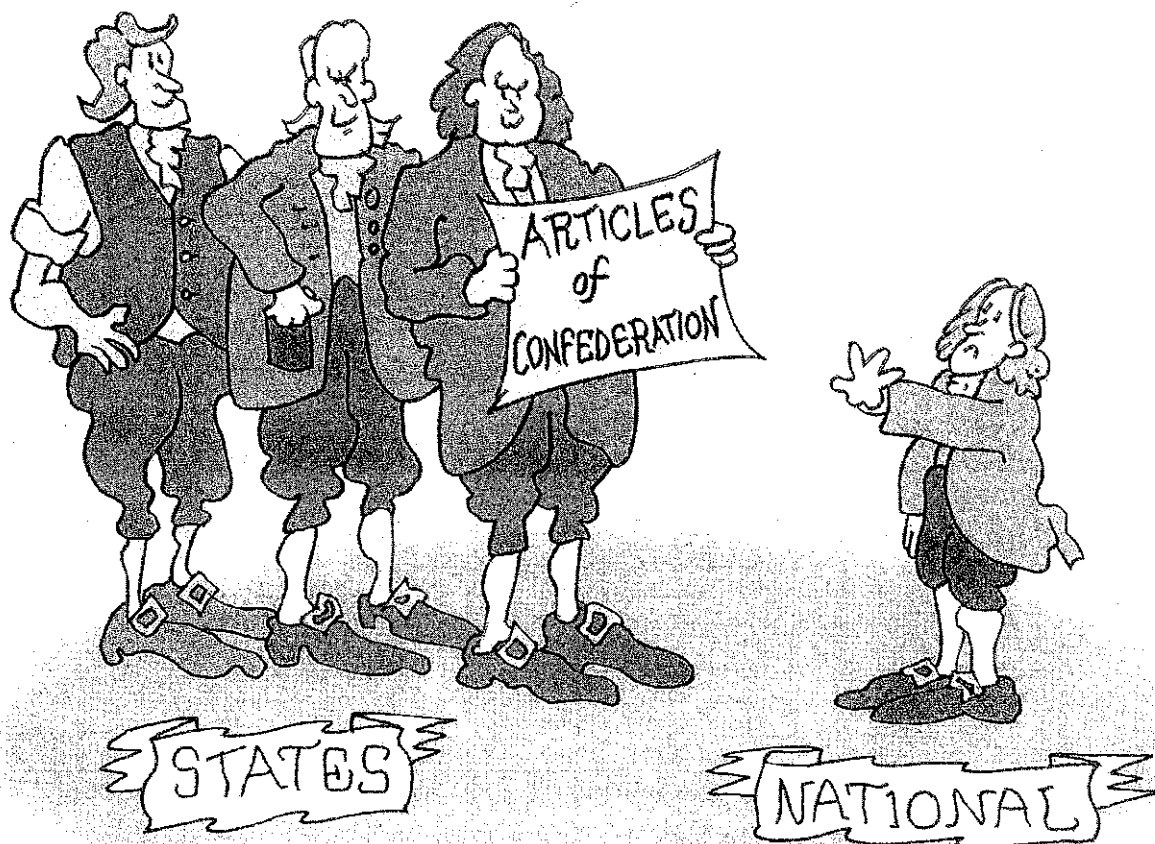
It was not easy to write and agree upon a constitution for the United States. The Founders had to deal with a number of difficult questions. What type of national government should they create? How much power should they give it?

The first problem the Founders faced was the people's fear of a strong national government. Americans believed that the British government had deprived people of their rights. They thought this was likely to happen with any national government that was both powerful and far away from the people. Citizens were convinced that government should be close to the people. That way the people could control their government and make certain that it did not violate their rights.

The second problem the Founders faced was the fear that some states would have more power in a national government than other states. The leaders in each state wanted to make sure that a national government would not threaten their state's interests. As a result, the most important issue was how states would vote in Congress. Would each state have one vote? Would states with greater population or wealth have more votes than the other states? Decisions in the Congress would be made by majority vote. Some leaders were afraid that the majority would use its power for its own interest at the expense of those who were in the minority.



Looking at this map, why would some Founders fear that some states would have more power in a national government than others?



Why did the Founders keep the power of the national government weak?

How did the Articles of Confederation organize the national government?

The Founders did agree that the states needed a central government. Their solution to fears of a strong national government was to create a weak one. The national government under the Articles of Confederation was simply a legislature, Congress; there were no executive or judicial branches.

The states were afraid that Congress might be able to control them. So they made sure that Congress was weak and its powers limited. The Articles left most

of the powers of government with the states. The national government had little power over the states and their citizens. Every action taken by Congress had to be with the consent, approval, and cooperation of the states.

To solve the problem of representation, the Articles gave each state one vote in Congress. The more populous states did not have more than one vote. The Articles also provided that on important matters, such as declaring war, nine states would have to agree. This way, the seven less populated states could not outvote the six larger states.



Why was it important that early settlers had the right to public education?

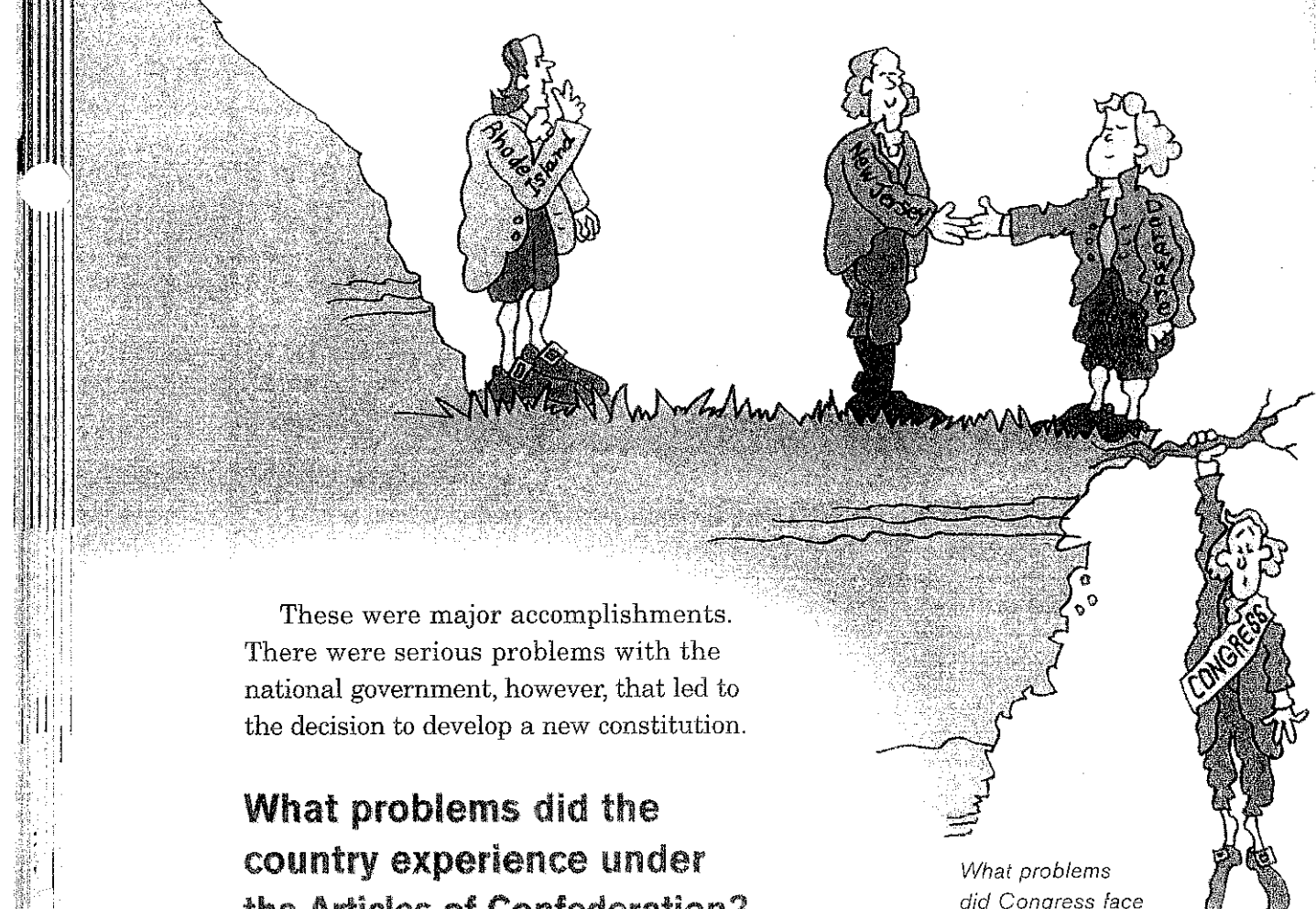
What did the national government achieve under the Articles of Confederation?

Despite a weak central government under the Articles of Confederation, the national government was responsible for a number of important achievements.

- * It successfully waged the war for independence against Great Britain.
- * It negotiated the peace treaty, known as the Treaty of Paris, to end the American Revolution.
- * It provided that each state recognize the laws of the other states. For example, a marriage in one state would be valid in all other states. A citizen could travel freely from

one state to another. Criminals who had crossed state borders could be sent back to the state in which they committed their crime.

It passed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. This was the most important law passed by Congress under the Articles. It gave people in the northwestern lands the right to organize their own governments. Once they had done this, they could ask to be admitted as new states with the same rights as the original thirteen states. The law also provided for public education and forbade slavery. The western settlers were guaranteed freedom of worship, the right to trial by jury, and due process of law.



These were major accomplishments. There were serious problems with the national government, however, that led to the decision to develop a new constitution.

What problems did the country experience under the Articles of Confederation?

Governing the nation under the Articles of Confederation was difficult. Here is a list of some problems the nation experienced.

- Congress did not have any money and it did not have the power to raise money. Congress had no power to tax. All Congress could do was to ask the states to pay certain amounts to support the costs of the national government. The states argued about paying their fair shares of government expenses. Some states refused to pay. Congress could do nothing to force a state to pay its fair share.

- Congress had no power over the state governments or their citizens. State governments and individual citizens often ignored the laws

What problems did Congress face without the financial support of the states?

passed by Congress. Congress had no way to make people obey its laws. For example, at the end of the Revolutionary War Congress signed a treaty with Great Britain. In the treaty, Congress promised to respect the rights of the Loyalists and ensure that they were treated fairly. Some state governments refused to respect the treaty. Those states refused to return property they had taken away from the Loyalists. These states also refused to force payment of money owed to the Loyalists before the start of the war. Thus, the national government was unable to live up to its promise to the British.

Congress could not make the states live up to trade agreements with other nations. Sometimes citizens imported goods from other countries and then refused to pay for them. This made people in foreign countries unwilling to trade with the United States. Many Americans lost money because they could not sell their goods to people in other nations.

Congress had no power to regulate trade among the states. Congress had no power to make laws regulating trade among the states. States taxed goods going from one state to another. Trading often became impossible. Business slowed down and people lost their jobs.

Citizens thought that their property rights were threatened. Many people believed that the states were not protecting the property rights of their citizens. Some people in the states had formed factions to promote their own interests at the expense of the common good. These factions with special interests became the majority in some state legislatures. People accused the factions of making laws to benefit themselves while ignoring the property rights of the minority. For example, they passed laws that canceled debts for those who were members of the faction and other laws that confiscated the property of people who had been Loyalists. People who were hurt by such laws argued that the states were not protecting the property of all citizens. Many people thought that a strong national government was needed to protect property rights.

Why was Shays' Rebellion important?

By 1786, many Americans were in financial trouble. Businesses failed, trade suffered, and many people were in debt. Soldiers who had fought in the Revolution still had not been paid. Congress could not control the country and people worried about what would happen.

Farmers in Massachusetts had serious economic problems. Farm prices were low, and when farmers could not pay their debts, many lost their farms and homes. Some were even put in prison. Many people claimed that the new state taxes had put them in debt. As a result, they felt that the state was not protecting their interests.

Then a dramatic series of events that became known as Shays' Rebellion finally convinced many Americans that it was time for a change. In an attempt to keep the state from taking their farms, local farmers under the leadership of Daniel Shays began to close down the courts where their cases were heard. The action against the courts spread to other towns and into neighboring states.

In January 1787, Shays led 2,000 rebels to Springfield, Massachusetts, to raid the federal arsenal for weapons. Shays' Rebellion frightened many property owners. People feared that the actions of the farmers might become widespread. The national government had been unable to put down the rebellion. People were asking how the country could continue to exist if it could not maintain law and order.

How did Shays' Rebellion force people to examine the weaknesses of the national government?

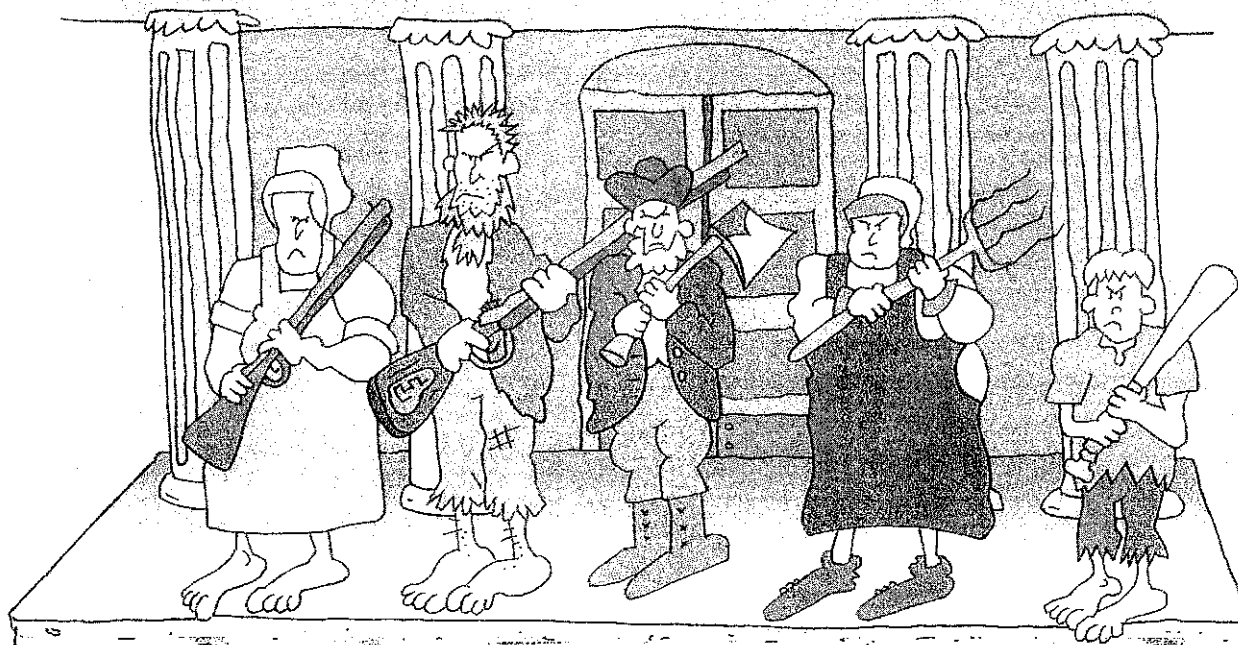
In January of 1786, Virginia had invited all the states to send delegates to a meeting to be held in Annapolis the following September. The purpose of the meeting was to consider trade problems. Only five states sent representatives to the Annapolis meeting. Without the other states present, the delegates who did attend the meeting were not able to accomplish much.

Everyone who was there, however, agreed that the regulation of trade could not be discussed separately from the larger political issues. The general discontent was leading to outbreaks of violence such as those led by Daniel Shays. The delegates decided to write a report for Congress. In the report, they asked for a convention of all the states.

After much debate, Congress agreed and invited the states to send delegates to a convention in Philadelphia. This meeting would be "for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation."

What did Daniel Shays and his followers hope to gain by their rebellion?

COURT HOUSE



Is a new constitution needed?

Imagine that your state is preparing to select delegates to send to the convention in Philadelphia. Your state has to decide what position its delegates will take regarding the Articles of Confederation. A heated debate is taking place. Some people argue that the Articles are fine as they are. Some people want to make changes to the Articles. Others want to throw away the Articles and write a new constitution.

Your class will work in three groups to debate this issue.

- **Group one.** Defend the Articles of Confederation as the best way to organize the national government. You should rely on the arguments in favor of a weak national government and strong state governments. Examine the successes of the national government under the Articles. Argue that the Articles should be kept, but revised to make up for their weaknesses. Propose possible revisions.

- **Group two.** Argue to throw away the Articles and write a new constitution. Examine the arguments against a weak national government and the problems with the Articles listed in this lesson. Examine the events of Shays' Rebellion as one example of problems that might arise when there is no strong national government. Explain why you believe that the nation needs a new constitution.

- **Group three.** Organize the class debate. While the other students are preparing their arguments, you should research debate procedures. During the debate, listen to the arguments presented by the other two groups. Then decide the position of your state's delegates based on the strongest evidence presented. You may want to review other lessons to help you make your choice.



LESSON REVIEW

- ① Why did the people in the newly independent states fear a strong national government?
- ② What were the Articles of Confederation? How did the Articles organize the national government to address the fears of the people and of the states?
- ③ What parts of government were not included in the Articles of Confederation?
- ④ What did the national government achieve under the Articles of Confederation?
- ⑤ What were the weaknesses of the national government under the Articles?
- ⑥ Why was Shays' Rebellion an important event?

ACTIVITIES

- ① Learn more about Shays' Rebellion. Make posters illustrating the farmers' point of view.
- ② Create a short play that shows one of the problems of government under the Articles of Confederation. Perform the play for your class.
- ③ Learn more about the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Explain how the ordinance provided for public education or the importance of forbidding slavery in the territories.